



Seventh Sunday of Easter

Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 24 May 2020

READINGS

Acts 1: 6-14; Psalm 68: 1-10, 32-35; 1 Peter 4: 12-14, 5: 6-11; John 17: 1-11

The in-between time

Today is the final Sunday of the Easter season. This past Thursday we celebrated the Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord and we now wait in anticipation for the celebration of Pentecost in 10 days time.

This time between Ascension and Pentecost has often been called the **waiting time, the in-between time**. **It's hard to wait for things isn't it?. It's hard to be calm in our anticipation. It's hard to not know when whatever we're looking forward to happen is going to happen, and that lack of knowing makes us anxious.**

I often think this time must have been an occasion of profound grief for the disciples. After the Resurrection Jesus had appeared and had remained with his disciples for forty days. They must have gotten used to his presence again. Then, in some mysterious way, he was no longer present with them. Luke says that as Jesus ascended to heaven two angels appeared and told the disciples not to keep gazing longingly up to the sky.

What this implied was that **the focus of their ministry was to be here on earth, in this world and that they shouldn't be too future oriented that they become irrelevant to the present moment. Jesus will be with them but, as they will discover, in an entirely different way. In fact it will be in a better way: he will not just be beside them, he will be within them, in the very heart of their being. That was the meaning of the Ascension experience.**

But today, during that uneasy time in between the Ascension and Pentecost, our Gospel reading suggests that our eyes need to be fixed not only on the world, but also on heaven. It reminds us how important prayer is. It takes us right back to Maundy Thursday and Jesus' own prayer, for his disciples, and for those who would come after them. We know that, for Jesus, prayer was a necessary ingredient in everything he did, and on this night of all nights,

it must have been absolutely vital for him. After this, as we know, he went out and prayed again, that he might know for certain the will of his heavenly Father for him. The task that lay in front of him was not just hard, it was agonizing, and without the strength he gained by knowing that he was in the Father and the Father was in him, he surely never could have done it.

So why are we reading this passage at this time? **Perhaps it is precisely because we have now arrived in that in-between season: the ten-day period between ascension Day and Pentecost, which is also a time of preparation, preparation for the birth – or perhaps the renewal, of the Church with the infilling of the Holy Spirit.**

We need to be reminded of all that is important in our Christian life, we need to recognize the gifts God has given each one of us and the opportunities for using them. And, like Jesus, for the task that lies before us, we too need to be armed with prayer. We need to know that we are in Jesus and he is in us.

So, on this last Sunday of Easter, as we continue to deal with a myriad of uncertainties in our lives - the uncertainty of children returning to school, waiting in anticipation for the opening up of the economy, while facing the real fear of a possible rise in infections in our nation – and many other concerns, **we're invited to listen in as Jesus makes a "High Priestly Prayer" to his Father in the Gospel of John.** The setting for his prayer is the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday, and the mood in the room as Jesus talks to God is, as you can imagine, heavy and poignant. He has just said goodbye to his disciples, and every word, deed, and gesture he has offered them is weighted with grief. He has washed their feet, fed them bread and wine, promised them the Holy Spirit, and commanded them to love one another. He has spoken to them with both tenderness and urgency, as if time is running out. Because it is.

Now, in the last moments before his arrest, he looks up to heaven and expresses his heart's deepest desires to God.

Have we not found ourselves there before? When all else had fallen away, and we were left with nothing to hold onto except prayer. Even when circumstances feel dire, prayer offers us a firm ground and acts as a conduit between our hearts and God's, between our questions and God's promises, between our deepest longings and God's grace. Prayer paves a way forward into renewed hope, strength, meaning, and possibility.

But that's just the fact of prayer. What does Jesus ask for in his high priestly prayer? Well, many things, but one request stands out to me right now — not least because it has not yet been answered: **"Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."**

Christ Praying.

That they may be one. Earlier in this same Gospel of John's, Jesus had commanded his disciples to love one another so that "everyone will know" that they are followers of his. Our ability to love one another across differences, our willingness to preserve and cherish our God-given unity in the midst of division, is precisely how the world will know who we are and whose we are. Our love for each other is how the world will see, taste, touch, hear, and find Jesus. It's through our unity that we will embody Jesus, make Jesus relatable, possible, plausible, to a dying world.

I don't know if you see the converse of this: What Jesus seems to be saying is that if we as his followers fail to reconcile and unify, if we normalize divisiveness, separation, bitterness, and discord, the world won't know what it needs to know about God, and in the terrible absence of that knowing, it will believe all kinds of falsehoods.

That such falsehoods will lead others to believe that the whole Christianity thing is a sham. It will assume that there really is no transformative power in the death and resurrection of Christ. It will imply that God is an angry, vindictive parent, determined only to shame and punish his children. It will make us believe that the universe is a cold, meaningless place — devoid of love. It will write off the Church as a defective and hypocritical institution — not Christ's living, breathing, healing body on earth.

So, this is a prayer for community. Jesus prays that, "all may be one." To be a follower of Jesus is to be a part of a greater whole.

"that all may be one."

Does that mean we all have to get along all the time? Does that mean we all have to agree all the time? NO! We are one in Christ whether we agree with each other or not. We are one in Christ whether we like one another or not. To become a part of Christ is to become a part of the community; a part of the one.

Jesus' prayer reminds us that our unity, our "oneness" is to be a sign to the world of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. Oneness and unity is about love. And if you have been a part of a family, a member of a church, or a community, you know that within that love there can be disagreements and squabbling. We are human. But the mystery of the incarnation is that God desired unity with us so much God became one of us. It is with God's help that we can grow into that oneness.

The disciples were in the time between the Ascension and the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. We are in the time between the first and second coming of Jesus Christ. May we rejoice in the assurance that Christ is with us, continuing to pray for our oneness, our unity.